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## First Time Tragedy, Second Time Farce: Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (1997), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2004) and *The Walworth Farce* (2006)

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### ABSTRACT

Irish playwright Enda Walsh's three plays *Disco Pigs* (1997), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2004) and *The Walworth Farce* (2006) subvert conventions of genre in order to map Walsh's status as a diasporic writer dealing with the legacy of the avant-garde and Beckett. This generic instability evolves across Walsh's work from experimenting with two-hander dialogues to subverting absurdism, culminating in a post-tragedy farce. The essay argues that Walsh asks important questions in his work about Irish self-mythologizing, both in terms of historical narratives and cultural representation. One of his most eloquent mechanisms for doing so is his exploration of the compulsion both to return to and escape from existing genres and forms.

### KEYWORDS

diaspora • farce • Irishness • modernity • tragedy

Each of Enda Walsh's three most successful plays to date, *Disco Pigs* (1997), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2004) and *The Walworth Farce* (2006), subverts generic expectations. *Disco Pigs* is a two-hander, but the anti-

pated duologue often reads as a shared monologue, the characters' voices and perspectives intersecting and diverging. A verbally rich text, it also demands an intensely choreographed physical performance in which the relationship between language and movement is constantly shifting. *The New Electric Ballroom* is heavily influenced by Beckett in its staging of three main characters caught in a cycle of traumatic repetition and the re-enactment of memory. Yet whereas over the course of Beckett's oeuvre there is a tendency towards diminution and disappearance, often most powerfully manifested through the fragmented, shrouded or buried body in performance, Walsh instead sets up tensions between linguistic over-production and eventless experience, with characters for whom frenetic, highly physicalized rehearsals of memories replace the possibility of living in the present and progressing to the future.

As with Beckett, language often is the event in this play, even if Beckett drove his theatre towards the final extinction of language. In *The Walworth Farce*, Walsh takes his exploration of genre a step further in a text haunted by Marx's famous words: 'Hegel observes somewhere that all great incidents and individuals of world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce' (Marx, 1907: 5). *The Walworth Farce* asks what happens when tragedy, as a genre, is no longer attainable: when its structures and certainties seem false and unreliable. The play is structurally a farce, with speeded up repetitions and near-misses, identity confusion and comical misunderstandings, but it also maps the space that tragedy once occupied. The genre of tragedy haunts this text, whose pathos comes from the tonal disjunction between its subtext of psychic pain, loss and grief and the jocular exaggeration of its theatricality and amateurish performance aesthetics. The play's postmodern, post-tragic status derives from the perception that theatre is limited, its 'supergenre' (Lennard and Luckhurst, 2002: 56) of tragedy outdated and anachronistic, to the extent that the writer is only able to find expression in hyperbolic deconstructions of it. *The Walworth Farce* is about migration, nationalism and fatherhood, but it is also about the imperative to abandon the genres of the past in favour of a kind of excessive, almost hysterical, parody of them.

The dialectical relationship between existing genres (physical theatre, theatre of the absurd, Beckettian avant-gardism, migration narratives, tragedy) and the impulse to subvert them captures the central tension in Walsh's work between Irish modernity and the lure of, and nostalgia for, the past. This conflict marks the writing of a number of Walsh's Irish or Anglo-Irish contemporaries such as Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson, all of whom work through the contradictions between tradition and modernity, between older forms and newer versions of tragedy, or between a mythical, romanticized view of Ireland and the

often harsher, more violent reality of the present. As Lionel Pilkington puts it in *Theatre & Ireland*:

One major idea of Irish plays from the 1980s to the present is that Ireland has to choose between two modes of expression: between a bizarre, backward-looking and almost exclusively rural premodernity often portrayed as gothic grotesquery and an identity based on speed, sexual attractiveness and an amazing, acrobatic, ability to compromise and adjust. (Pilkington, 2010: 67)

While this most accurately describes *The Walworth Farce*, it also applies to *Disco Pigs*, in which two teenagers rebel against the older political, anti-colonial narratives that shape their parents' generation. Instead, they transcend the polarities of English/Irish, oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized by reference to a globalized popular culture (television, films, sport, music) which filters into the private language the pair adopt to signify their alienation, anomie and complicity with one another. Both plays sound like Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, described in highly critical terms by Vic Merriman as 'a sustained dystopic vision of a land of gratuitous violence, craven money-grubbing and crass amorality' (Merriman, 2004: 253). Yet the difference in Walsh's work is that the 'gothic grotesquery' and 'gratuitous violence' are cartoonish, consciously and self-reflexively non-mimetic; the opposite of the real, not an extension of it. In *The New Electric Ballroom*, the intrusion of a rock star, an ersatz Irish version of Elvis Presley or Jerry Lee Lewis, disrupts the rural lives of the three sisters (the echo of Chekhov here is notable) from an Irish coastal fishing village. Without the austerity of a Beckett text, *The New Electric Ballroom* brings colourful, chaotic images, textual and visual, to the usual chiaroscuro of Beckett's palette. The play's absurdism is over-intensified, discordantly vivid, its brash reds and pinks signalling the transition from a Beckettian black and white television to glorious colour, or the change in *The Wizard of Oz* from monochromatic Kansas to Oz's technicolor. Yet in Walsh's play, the characters' lives are constrained, as they often are in Beckett, by the inability to escape trauma and to shunt narratives onwards from a rehearsal of the past to a living in the present. In his work, the genre and its conventions provide a framework but not a solution. Much of the tension in these plays comes from the way Walsh's linguistic playfulness and verbal overproduction confront and displace the legacy of Beckett's work and its reliance on understatement, concision, ellipsis and the asymptotical drift towards silence.

*Disco Pigs* is a self-conscious performance by the characters of their own lives. The characters in *The New Electric Ballroom* are locked into their repeated narratives, much less aware of their rehearsal of a past event. In *The Walworth Farce*, the characters are trapped 'within metathe-

atrical reenactments of traumatic memories and imagined pasts' (O'Brien, 2011: 648). The play is about migration and myth-making, about lies and the power of narrative, but it is also about Walsh's own role as a writer grappling with post-avant-garde quandaries about the status of language and a negotiation with form. *The Walworth Farce* uses form to express what Walsh's texts, coming, as they do, after Beckett, cannot: loss, absence and inadequacy. His use of the genre of farce allows him to critique reactionary notions of Irish identity while undercutting the definitiveness of that critique. His plays acknowledge the power of consoling narratives of nation and identity while exposing their corrosiveness and viciousness. Form, the tragedy as farce, for Walsh, is critique without condemnation.

In a 2008 interview, Walsh describes his work as follows:

I don't like seeing everyday life on stage: it's boring. I like my plays to exist in an abstract, expressionistic world: the audience has to learn its rules, and then connect with these characters who are, on the surface, dreadful monsters. (Costa, 2008)

Characters in all three of these plays lose any sense of generative cognitive power; they are unable to think, becoming characters delivering lines and actions in performance rather than having a correlation with psychologically complex human beings. Once Walsh's characters are set in motion, they adhere to the logics of narrative (the account of a traumatic memory) or dramatic form (the rules of the farce), so that they function as a critique of notions of authentic expression or individualized thinking. By giving us characters who fail – the social failure of Pig and Runt in *Disco Pigs*, the failure to move on from a traumatic sexual betrayal in *The New Electric Ballroom*, the failure to turn migration and grief into tragedy and diasporic, postcolonial narrative in *The Walworth Farce* – Walsh engages in a double deconstruction both of national myths and of Ireland's theatrical/literary legacy.

Walsh wrote *Disco Pigs* in 1996 for the Cork-based theatre company Corcadorca. The company was founded in 1991 with the objective of staging a mix of new plays and classics. *Disco Pigs* was Walsh's second original script for the company. Reviews of its highly successful run at the Edinburgh Festival in 1997 focused on the energy of the two performers (Cillian Murphy and Eileen Walsh) and the experimental language Walsh invented for his characters. One critic said that 'Walsh's writing reminds me of the early parts of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: like a brutal Joyce of the post-punk age' (Peter, 1997), while another noted that:

The whole play is written in [the characters'] private language, their rich Cork accents laced with their own coded phrases, vocabulary and

pronunciation to produce a sort of addled baby-talk which is well-nigh impenetrable. So it is that Walsh skilfully overcomes the writer's problem of articulating the experience of the inarticulate. (Hemming, 1997)

*Disco Pigs* takes place over two days in the life of Cork City teenagers Darren and Sinead, nicknamed Pig and Runt respectively. The text is a duologue in which the characters take turns narrating and acting out the events of the plot. The action is framed by the present, namely Pig and Runt's seventeenth birthday, but most of the dialogue reports or re-enacts past events: for example, at the start, as the stage directions report, Pig and Runt mimic '*the sound of an ambulance ... and the sound a pregnant woman in labour makes*' (Walsh, 1997: 3) as they perform the scene of their own births. As the play develops, we follow the characters on a picaresque voyage across Cork City and out to the harbour at Crosshaven, weaving together moments of teenage angst, sex, disco-dancing and gratuitous violence.

The characters' dialogue becomes a kind of double-voiced narration at times:

PIG. We're da reel ting, ol girl! Les split dis party, yeah!

PIG and RUNT *in taxi*.

PIG. Crossheaven! Drive on mister cabman!!

*Sound of a car*.

RUNT. An off we go!

PIG. Now das reel class!

RUNT. Look how da scummy wet grey a Pork Sity spindown da plughole.

PIG. As da two speed on, an on we speed! (1997: 16).

The play's themes of social alienation, rebellious adolescence and the rejection of adulthood are transmitted by this shared private language. As a result, the play neither falls into the genre of a monologue nor a realistic duologue; instead, it restlessly moves between the two.

Generic instability is consonant with the temporal dislocations the characters experience. They refuse to be defined by the past, socially, culturally or historically. They resent the university students they encounter because of their retro fashion sense, calling them 'dancin bags a Oxfam' (1997: 12), and mocking their misplaced respect for their elders:

RUNT. Wat do dey wanna be?

PIG. Dey wanna be der mams an dads a course!

RUNT. Wadda we wanna be, Pig?

PIG. Leff alone. Righ pal! (1997: 13).

Rejecting the pseudo-trendy conservatism of students, Pig and Runt seek instead a kind of frenetic modernity in the form of '*loud disco/techno music*' (1997: 8). As Pig says, 'Dis is sex-in-step to dat beautifull soun dat

deep down thru me pump da danceflower' (1997: 11). Walsh captures the pounding beats of the music onomatopoeically, 'Pump pump pump pump oh fuck my head ja luvly beat deep inta me' (1997: 8), the thudding sound obliterating the historicized self in the physical intensity of the absolute present.

Pig and Runt not only reject their parents and peers but also dissociate themselves from the defining political conflicts of the past, as expressed by Pig's disdain for the 'provo pub' (1997: 10), with its IRA history, that Pig and Runt visit twice during the play. When they first enter, Runt whistles 'God Save The Queen' and Pig tells us 'No soul drink ere! No one gis a fuck about dem nordy bas-turds. Way bodder? News a da week is let dem do each odder in!' (1997:10). Pig and Runt reject nationalist republicanism because it is tainted by its association with their outmoded parents and the generation before globalization and popular culture. Their language in the pub is confrontational, yet also embodies a kind of moral directness, for example when Pig shouts at the republicans: 'Ere, shouldn't ya be out plantin bombs an beaten up ol ladies, ya fookin weirdos!!' (1997: 22). In *Disco Pigs*, the characters' refusal to be defined by coercive historical discourses, added to their rejection of the past in the form of a repackaged hipster chic, gives them a kind of compelling iconoclasm.

This is most fully apparent in the private language Pig and Runt speak, a mix of glossolalia, brand names and TV shows, often sexual, violent and scabrously funny. It unites their teenage and childhood selves and rejects the linguistic rules of adult authority, education, pronunciation and formality: their words are spelt as if they have been misheard, semi-understood or purposely misinterpreted. Walsh validates the characters' viewpoint not just because it is rebellious but also because its directness is often poetic. Runt at one point describes a woman in a pub as having 'chip paper skin wid drawn on eyes an lips dat lookalike well dangerous skidmarks' (1997: 22): the simile is perfectly in line with Runt's character and the abrasiveness of her language, even as it tells us that her alienation shapes her words and gives her the capacity for striking linguistic expression. The lines show us how narrow her frame of reference is, but how originally she operates within it.

In *Disco Pigs*, language is the key mechanism for exposing reactionary nationalisms and 'phoney' thinking. The play moves beyond the characters' rebellious teenage lives to smuggle in quite significant critiques of ideology, particularly of the Celtic tiger version of turbo-Ireland, in a way similar to Martin McDonagh's play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, which Pilkington sees as 'what the alternative to Ireland's Celtic Tiger modernity might look like' (Pilkington, 2010: 70). *Disco Pigs* is on the surface nihilistic, rejecting history and high culture; its characters are

embodied rather than cognitive, sexualized rather than aestheticised, individualistic rather than socialist or republican, in the older sense of the word. Yet alongside such nihilism is the possibility of new, if harsh, poetic perspectives emerging from the flotsam and jetsam left after the critique of ideological grand narratives. So when Pig calls Runt ‘my best pal in da whole whirl’ (Walsh, 1997: 14) or Runt refers to ‘da hole a da estate’ (1997: 15), in both cases, their claustrophobic intimacy transcends itself to offer new (poetic) perceptions via their linguistic slips and mishearings. Walsh gives the characters accidental critical insights via his use of puns: Pig, for example, refers to *Baywatch* characters as ‘Caliphoney babies!’ (1997: 19), or decries sporting nationalism after Irish athletic victories by calling out the ‘nationalist rant-hymn’ and the fact that ‘anybod who even fuck an Irish dey all have a liddle tear a boy in der eye when dey say, “dis is a great day for Our-land!”’ (1997: 24). Pig and Runt reject a reactionary Irishness as much as they repudiate shallow, globally consumed TV programmes like *Baywatch*.

Pig and Runt are reject-everything teenage rebels, resistant to Irish nationalism, American cultural imperialism, and reactionary postmodernism alike. They are surrounded by powerful discourses but subvert them to create their own language; not a broken or fragmented one like Beckett’s, but one full of puns and pastiche, born out of excess and accumulation rather than attenuation and diminution as in Beckett. If Beckett’s austere limit-texts have become an avant-garde genre in their own right, then Walsh invokes and supersedes them, using reckless words to fill Beckett’s silences, using the characters’ need to talk as a way of conveying the loss, grief and belatedness transmitted by Beckett’s silences or nervous repetitions.

Two of the plays Walsh wrote after *Disco Pigs*, *Bedbound* and *Misterman* (2001) were composed almost entirely of long monologues. According to Walsh, this proved limiting:

[After *Bedbound*] I felt ready to move on. I knew I could write words, rhythm, atmosphere, drive the audience through an emotional narrative from A to Z. But I wanted to try to create drama in a more structural sense – drama where you interest the audience in a world you’ve created and then let them feel the loss of it for themselves. (McMillan, 2007)

As a genre, the theatrical monologue is often associated with an anti-realist element of theatre. Pavis, in his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, notes that:

le théâtre réaliste ou naturaliste n’admet le monologue que lorsqu’il est motivé par une situation exceptionnelle (rêve, somnambulisme, ivresse, effusion lyrique). Dans les autres cas, le monologue révèle l’artificialité théâtrale et les conventions du jeu. (Pavis 2004, 216) [realistic or naturalistic theatre doesn’t permit the monologue unless it is required by an exceptional situation (a dream, sleep-walking, drunkenness, lyrical



outburst). In other cases, the monologue reveals theatre's artificiality or the conventions of acting. *My translation.*]

Making the whole text a monologue immediately heightens such a sense of theatricality. Lehmann extends this by linking the monologue to the postdramatic when he writes:

[i]t is this *transgression of the border of the imaginary dramatic universe to the real theatrical situation* that leads to a specific interest in the text form of the monologue, as well as in the specific theatricality attached to the monologue. It is not by coincidence, therefore, that one aspect of postdramatic theatre revolves essentially around the monologue. It offers monologues of diverse kinds; it turns dramatic texts into monological texts and also chooses non-theatrical texts to present them in monologue form. (Lehmann, 2006: 127)

In *Disco Pigs*, we have dialogue sometimes merging into a double-voiced monologue to capture the characters' complicity with each other and sense of alienation from everyone else.

In *The New Electric Ballroom*, long monologues punctuate the dialogue. Yet rather than dialogue based on alternation and exchange, many of the play's speeches are conceived as an already-rehearsed repetition of familiar narratives and formulas. The characters are performing their parts, playing earlier versions of themselves, 'forced to re-enact and relive the very traumatic memories and constructed narratives that imprison them' (O'Brien, 2011: 649). In *The New Electric Ballroom*, two sisters constantly relive an event from their teenage years with their younger sister acting as a kind of theatrical prompter. As with a number of absurdist plays like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *The Chairs*, which this play generically resembles, the premise of Walsh's text is that this repetition has been going on indefinitely. In *The New Electric Ballroom*, repetition is a compulsion which binds and warps sibling relationships, and the characters appear to have lost any coherent sense of self or agency. The play is about how repeated narratives replace lived experience, how they operate as shared horizons and insuperable barriers to the formation of autonomous identity and affective maturity.

Whereas in *Disco Pigs* the emphasis is on language, in *The New Electric Ballroom*, the focus is less on the propositional content of language, or its linguistic slippages, but rather on the rehearsal and compulsive performance of trauma. Or perhaps hysteria, in the sense in which Juliet Mitchell uses the term, is more accurate:

[u]sually the distinction is made that the trauma of traumatic neurosis is actual and real and that of hysteria rather a fantasy of trauma. [...] In traumatic neurosis the trauma is in the present, in hysteria it is in the past. In hysteria this forgotten past trauma is constantly revived through re-enactment – one does make a drama out of a crisis. (Mitchell, 2003: 8–9)

The event being re-enacted is a scene of sexual betrayal between the two sisters, a teenage Clara discovering her sister Breda having sex with the famous visiting singer after he had expressed a sexual interest in her too. The scene of betrayal is central to the narrative that binds the sisters together and the play shows how the three sisters are complicit in using the traumatic event to structure their relationships to one another. But further than this, the play shows how traumatic memories are transmitted across generations, as the elder sisters' story governs their younger sister's life. As Ada says, 'I'm only a baby when I first hear that story from you, Breda. Then thousands of times I've made you tell it again and again like some child... though I am not a child. (*Pause.*) Still, it hurts you just the same, isn't that right?' (Walsh, 2008: 30). Like Clara earlier, Ada has moments when she recognises how destructive these family narratives are, becoming nostalgic for the prelapsarian, childhood world before the scene of grown-up sexual betrayal: 'A little child runs past. A six-year-old and I recognise her face when she turns around and smiles. I've seen her in old photographs and I know I'm looking at me running up this beach. She's the girl before you taught me all these stories' (2008: 25). The play ends with a chance for Ada to escape the family's coercive domestic myths through a romance with a local fisherman, Patsy. Yet the risk of trying to evade the controlling family narratives is too great. Patsy can't manage it because his 'heart's too scarred by days and nights alone' (2008: 44) and so the story of sexual betrayal starts up again, only this time Ada plays the role of the 'woman who's never been kissed' (2008: 45). At the end of the play, 'the stories take over and our pattern returns' (2008: 45).

By showing how the characters cue and direct one another's performances, Walsh's play opens up new perspectives on the role of trauma and narrative within the family. For these characters, the rehearsal of painful memories is both a habit and a way of being. It is the evasion rather than the evocation of emotion, and represents the refusal to inhabit the present, or indeed any discernible temporality. *The New Electric Ballroom* alerts us to the pre-scripted quality of the characters' language: it has become automatic, devoid of agency. These 'characters' are no longer representations of psychological individuals but illustrations of processes, patterns or habits of thought. Their words are not meant to be realistic but to illustrate the operations of storytelling in terms of sexual repression, familial dominance and social control. The play adopts Beckett's cyclical repetitions but adds expressivity and colour to the earlier playwright's jabbing, nervous fragments, which lead to philosophical reflections on the ontology of language or the falsity of representational performance. If Beckett's work is about the void, the inexpressibility of trauma, Walsh's is about trauma's quasi-pleasurable desire to express it-

self, its almost joyful verbal multiplicity; his language is rich in onomatopoeia, poetic images, tactile, sensuous and figuratively concrete. As Breda says in the opening speech of the play:

BREDA (*fast and frightened*) By their nature people are talkers. You can't deny that. You could but you'd be affirming what you're trying to argue against and what would be the point of that? No point. Just adding to the sea of words that already exist out there in your effort to say that people are not talkers. (2008: 5)

Indeed, it could be claimed that, whereas Beckett's texts often move towards silence and stasis, Walsh's operate via the conscious and comic over-production of the verbal and the physical, creating an artificial, non-mimetic onstage world, the opposite of realism or naturalism. His characters' logorrhoea, in the mould of Beckett's Lucky delivering his long 'Think' monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, and numerous other Beckett characters, sound like automata, vehicles for language to pass through.

Speaking about the risks of realism in theatre, Hélène Cixous argues that: 'So long as we take to be the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask ... we will remain prisoners of the monotonous machination that turns every "character" into a marionette' (Cixous, 1974: 387). Walsh turns this insight on its head by self-consciously embracing the status of his characters as marionettes: words and narratives pass through them and any attempt at staging genuine character subjectivity is barred. In *The New Electric Ballroom*, the female characters do almost literally wear a mask of sorts, since each time they begin a new iteration of the story, the characters' lips are smeared with aggressive red lipstick. For Walsh, the theatre is not the reflection of an external reality but instead the "exchange zone" between the real and the theatrical' (Cixous, 1974: 401). The real is subject to an endless deferral as the narratives rehearse but never resolve the characters' experience of trauma, betrayal and denied desire. The play is a meditation on the collective nature of family narratives and the inter-generational transmission of trauma, while at the same time positioning Walsh as author in the role of marionette operator.

It is in Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* that the subversion of genre is most systematic. The play is often viewed as a companion piece to *The New Electric Ballroom*. In a 2007 interview, Walsh explains what attracted him to farce as a genre:

In *The Walworth Farce* I decided to experiment with the idea of writing farce – because in a way it's a form that's all about structure. It's certainly not about full characterisation. It's more about mathematics and movements.... (Walsh in McMillan, 2007)

In the play, a tyrannical Irish patriarch, Dinny, forces his two adult sons to perform the same farcical version of a family narrative every day of their lives. It is set in the kitchen, living room and bedroom of a poky-fifteenth-floor council flat in a tower block on the Walworth Road in South London. Dinny and his two sons, Blake and Sean, play younger versions of themselves in the farce, while also performing as multiple different characters, for which the actors have to swap wigs, props and costumes with increasing speed. Their farce is an invented slapstick version of the violent crime committed by Dinny that prompted their emigration from Ireland when the boys were small. Where in *Disco Pigs* we see repeated events in the course of the narrative, and in *The New Electric Ballroom*, several iterations by a different character of a traumatic event, in *The Walworth Farce*, the characters are trapped in the repeated farcical performance from the outset. As the play progresses, things start to unravel and, as Walsh says, ‘when that [structure] breaks down – that’s when the play really begins to speak’ (McMillan, 2007). What signals the disruption of the farce in this case is the entrance of a young black Tesco cashier, Hayley, who immediately threatens the whole fictional, farcical edifice.

For Charlotte McIvor, ‘[u]ltimately, *The Walworth Farce* captures multiple narratives of transnational Irish histories pinpointing themes of immigration, emigration, race and home’ (McIvor, 2010: 463). The play deals with a violent crime, the erasure of history and the dark side of myths of migration and nation. Instead of depicting Dinny’s murder of his brother and his brother’s wife, it shows us a character who is using performance to hide or, more precisely, to theatrically displace the truth. In doing so, Walsh’s play fits into a long line of theatrical predecessors: ‘From Synge through O’Casey to Martin McDonagh and beyond, Irish dramatists have regularly arraigned their characters for escaping from the harshness of reality into dream, fantasy, illusion, pretence’ (Nightingale, 2007). He takes from Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* a concern with crime, fathers and sons, and the tendency towards escapist self-aggrandizement. From a play like Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire*, revolving around a senile grandmother in a country cottage kitchen, telling the same incomplete story again and again, he takes his concern with storytelling as a habit of mind or obsessive act, and his interest in juxtaposing the past and the present, old Ireland and the modernity of the new. The difference between Walsh and his predecessors is the way he uses a deliberately amateurish aesthetic, cartoonish characters, comic hyperbole and all the resources of the visual and physical elements of the stage to foreground the artificiality of the action and the pathos of the characters’ hyper-investment in their own illusions/delusions.

In the course of the play the father, Dinny, pretends to be a brain surgeon, there are flying animals, cardboard coffins, monopoly money and people setting fire to nuns. The text seems on the surface to be all play-acting and pretence, like children's games with a manic edge, full of 'Irish eccentricities galore' (Nightingale, 2007). But when Dinny notices a mistake with one of the props for the performance, the items of food that his son Sean buys every morning from the local Tesco (where he speaks to Hayley, against his father's orders), the audience suddenly realises that the farce, as well as being highly comical, is also oppressive, tyrannical and controlling. Dinny stops the action, pointing out the error: 'The story doesn't work if we don't have the facts' (Walsh, 2007: 13). Given the obviously cartoonish nature of their rehearsed performance, we have to read this line's wider implications: that it is the fierce adherence to the details of this manufactured narrative, no matter how absurd, which allows Dinny to escape from the truth of his crime. Yet even this is too literal: the obsessive rehearsals are not simply a way of processing his crime psychologically, but instead they are a distorted, falsified, absurd and grotesque version of the past, one with no correlation with the truth, whose very form is a comic and sceptical commentary on the desire for escapist narratives that mythologize and idealize home, nation and self.

The decision to write a farce can be seen as a way for Walsh to explore his characters' autonomy: 'I always feel as if I'm completely observing where these characters are going to go or what they're going to do' (Walsh, 2009). With this particular play, that autonomy mutates into a kind of depsychologized automatism. Characters resemble puppets, in line with Eric Bentley's view of farce as 'a theatre in which, though the marionettes are men, the men are supermarionettes. It is the theatre of the surrealist body' (Bentley, 1965: 252). As in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, a tape recorder prompts the action by playing Irish songs, 'An Irish Lullaby' and 'A Nation Once Again', alerting us to the pre-scripted nature of the dialogue. The increasing speed and mechanization of the action are central to the play's comedy and genre. Like Feydeau's farces, which convey 'the Bergsonian view that as man begins to resemble a machine so he becomes less human and increasingly an object of laughter' (Booth, 1988: 147), Walsh's play seems to be spinning out of control, a characteristic of the genre itself, as Booth suggests: 'the speeding up of stage action is an old and familiar technique in farce' (Booth, 1988: 148).

The comical impact of the increasing speed of the action and the actors' virtuosity eventually alert us to Walsh's wider desire to subvert generic conventions, mapping out the space of tragedy via the production of farce, creating a kind of exoskeleton of tragedy, a post-tragedy haunted by its own escapist impulses and pervasive aesthetic of failure.

The genres of tragedy, farce, diasporic narrative and domestic crime drama all overlap here, with searing monologues of Irish identity, migration and displacement sitting alongside high slapstick, pratfalls, absurdist, surrealist, cartoonish and hyperbolic speeches. Walsh's excessive theatricality makes the play a consciously comic inversion of tragedy. It focuses our attention on his theatre's necessarily amateurish failure, the failure of the genre of tragedy as an adequate vehicle for the expression of profound emotions of guilt, shame, betrayal and exile.

As with *The New Electric Ballroom*, the play is most powerful when dealing with the transmission of guilt and trauma across generations. Dinny's crime implicates his sons and can only be sustained with their forced collusion. At a key point, the story breaks down when Sean asks 'Is any of this story real?' (Walsh, 2007: 29). This prompts Dinny to begin a monologue about his experiences as an Irish migrant to London: 'I run the same race a million Irishmen ran. But pockets full of new money and Paddy's keys in my hands with Walworth Road a final destination, a sure thing, a happy ever after. I run' (2007: 30). But, crucially, at the end of the monologue, Dinny asks his son to continue his speech, once again showing how the father's own narratives are handed down to, and memorized by, his sons: 'I stand there looking at the green scabby grass of the roundabout and my knackered shoes. Fuck. (*A Pause.*) And then what happened, Blake? What then, tell me? *BLAKE continues, detached.*' (2007: 31). That ostensibly confessional narrative, seemingly a moment of intimate self-exposure, is re-framed by this line as coercive and restrictive. Equally, the play asks us to compare the speech to the exaggerated absurdism of the rest of Dinny's tales from Ireland, leading us to ask whether these apparently more authentic and romanticized words about migration may not in fact be just as fantastical and illusory as the overt farce itself, with its flying horses and cardboard coffins. As Blake says, there was a time when his father's myths of Ireland convinced him, but no longer: '... all them pictures have stopped. I say his words and all I can see is the word. A lot of words piled on top of other words. There's no sense to my day 'cause the sense isn't important anymore. No pictures. No dreams. Words only' (2007: 22).

In her review of the Traverse Theatre production of the play at the 2007 Edinburgh Fringe, Lyn Gardner noted that:

[i]t is not an easy play to watch in any sense, especially as the bodies pile up and the wigs and moustaches are swapped with lightning speed. But its two-hour duration repays the effort and you leave shattered, not only by its Greek tragedy ending but also by its depiction of theatre as an imprisoning lie rather than a force for good. (Gardner, 2007)

Gardner's response to the play as an 'imprisoning lie' is echoed in other reflections on the work: 'What does it mean to suggest ... that perfor-

mance might augment and reproduce, rather than rehearse in order to assuage, the traumas of the past?' (Solga, 2011: 89). For all its comedy, *The Walworth Farce* offers a profound critique of the father, Dinny's, mythmaking, his refusal to confront his guilt and his instrumentalization of Irish narratives of diaspora and belonging in the name of psychological repression and patriarchal domination.

It is the tension between the play's comic excess and probing critique of such myths which makes it so powerful. In his discussion of farce, Eric Bentley argues that it 'characteristically promotes and exploits the widest possible contrasts between tone and content, surface and substance' (Bentley, 1965: 243). This is fundamental to the success of *The Walworth Farce*: on the surface, it is a caricatural, amateurish rehearsal of an outlandishly grotesque and silly version of events, resolutely comedic in its treatment of death, grief and exile. Underneath, it shows us characters trapped at multiple levels: they are emigrants imprisoned both physically and psychologically, trapped by guilt, whose construction of the utopian space of Ireland, home and nation, is comically absurd. We also detect the desire to escape into fiction, into a theatricalized version of the past and of home, which the play so eloquently depicts as grotesque, while at the same time exposing the powerful compulsion to rehearse and repeat those narratives. It is precisely that gap between surface and substance which leads the audience to read the play in terms of what it cannot express: failed tragedy, or its status as post-tragedy; its desire to construct narratives but anxiety about doing so, its rejection of psychological realism and its substitution of a kind of marionette-character without the capacity for authentic or direct expression.

Walsh's work can be seen as highly critical of a number of Irish national myths and cultural forms. As this essay has discussed, his plays touch on major ideas such as republicanism, teenage social exclusion, sexual repression, the association of Irishness and storytelling, migration and the sanctification of homeland. *Disco Pigs* shows us the moment a retreat into rebellious, hermetic adolescence ends, when one of the two characters, Runt, rejects the pair's invented language: Pork Sity reverts to its proper name, Cork, 'da liddle quack quacks' become 'ducks' (Walsh, 1997: 29). In *The New Electric Ballroom*, Walsh portrays characters caught in a loop of self-obsession and traumatic repetition, apparently unaware of the contagiousness of their sexual repression of traumatic memories. While that play creates potent visual images in performance, a lurid pink cake, red lipstick, party dresses on walls, *The Walworth Farce* is all motion and commotion, where ideologies of nationhood and narratives of displacement, themes of guilt and expiation, mechanisms of fiction, deception and theatricality, are bound together through language and choreographed farce.

*The Walworth Farce* acutely exposes the coercive ideology of family, home and nation in a shocking gesture at the end, when the young black female character, Hayley, accidentally drawn into the re-enactment of the farce, has her face daubed white by Dinny so she can play the role of his wife Maureen. In one complex gesture, Walsh crystallises the repressive and reactionary cultural and identity politics behind some of the romantic, sentimental or stereotyped myths his play has turned into comic farce up until this point. If the farce form has disarmed the audience, and allowed the tragic to express itself in the negative by the repudiation of 'tragedy' as a genre, then this moment suddenly challenges the whole system of representation, the interplay of genres, within which Walsh is operating.

The genre of tragedy may have been exposed as a set of limited and falsifying conventions, replaced by the nihilistic exuberance of farce, but the text suddenly deflates any such confidence in this comical, postmodern reversal of genre. Instead, it confronts the make-do aesthetic of this amateurish rehearsal with its own potential irresponsibility by introducing a moment of casually racist symbolic violence. In one single gesture, Walsh demolishes his own substitution of farce for tragedy by bringing the mechanisms of racial violence and gendered oppression into the hyper-theatricalized world of these comic grotesques. If the genre of tragedy is no longer a possibility, then farce is only ever a partial comic expression of its disappearance, and one whose own recourse to the critique value of theatricality is suddenly subverted by its collision with the material reality of racism, sexism and the symbolic violence of theatrical representation.

This is the corollary of Dinny's tyrannical mythmaking: a narcissistic self-obsession with his own identity, his own myths, to the exclusion of others, leading him to erase Hayley's blackness so that she can become a performer in his whitewashing of his crimes. This might be the most painful lesson that emerges from Ireland's reckoning with its modernity: that centuries of colonial oppression do not automatically sensitize people to the dynamics of oppression and, indeed, may prevent a recognition of oppression, or even encourage a displacement of it onto others, onto new immigrants, or recently arrived workers from the rest of Europe and beyond.

The play ends with the younger son Sean being given the chance to escape from the scene of the farce as his father and brother lie dead, but instead, he daubs his own face brown with shoe polish in a feeble shouldering of a theatrical guilt that mirrors and inverts his father's earlier imposition of white superiority onto Hayley's skin. Sean will remain trapped within the world of the play, the chaotic-looking flat, looking around, in the guise of Hayley, at the end of the farce, the aftermath



of tragedy, and the collapse of the structures, the forms and the genres within which to make sense of the crimes and counter-crimes of the past.

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